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ABSTRACT

An adult educator who teachers General Educational Development (GED) test preparation conducted an action research project to determine whether learning activities requiring students to learn about and discuss famous paintings would equip them with critical thinking skills that they could eventually use when completing the reading and writing portions of the GED test. The instructor developed 10 brief (15-30 minutes) lessons around four paintings. The lessons required students to discuss what they saw in the paintings. Eventually, the students were asked to apply the same methods to several poems. Art and literary terms used during both sets of activities were recorded and kept for review. The instructor monitored students' progress in a research journal and interviewed four students about the art lessons and critical thinking. Students also completed several GED-type essay questions. The multiple levels of critical thinking exhibited by students surprised the instructor. During the study, students analyzed, associated, transferred, organized, listed, supported, explained, recognized, labeled, defined, compared, concluded, and created information. The teacher also collected evidence documenting that the lessons gave students new insight into the meaning of critical thinking and opportunities to gain knowledge from each other rather than just from books or their teacher. (MN)

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# Art for Art's Sake and More

Mary Ellen Dreybus

Virginia Adult Education Research Network
Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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# Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

## *Art for Art's Sake and More*

*Mary Ellen Dreybus, Hampton City Schools*

### Background

"Just tell me what to write."
"Tell us what this poem means."

Critical thinkers are those who seek reasons for their evaluations and judgments. The reading and writing portions of the GED test require students to understand what they read and to respond with answers supporting that understanding. I have long been aware that my GED students are uncomfortable articulating their opinions in an essay or analyzing the theme of a poem. I wanted to encourage critical thinking by focusing on the reasons behind the answer as much as on the answer itself. Could we practice critical thinking? What classroom activities would encourage critical thought?

Another problem for my students is their inability to use traditional academic vocabulary. For example, they may intuitively understand a poem but miss the GED question because they do not know the poetic terminology. I try to make daunting words like "metaphor" and "irony" easy to understand, but my students seem to feel negatively about art and literary terms. Could we develop a vocabulary and practice using these terms?

Initial assessment of adults attending my refresher class usually indicates their ability to pass the GED after a semester or two of class work. We meet six hours each week for a combination of teacher instruction and computer lab use. The class is made up of a dozen adults who attend regularly. While reading articles about critical thinking, it occurred to me that my students needed more opportunities to talk and to express what they were thinking. I had read several studies that pointed out the importance of teachers taking time to listen to answers, to wait for answers, and to further probe students' answers. Also, I had been a docent at our local art museum and had so much fun helping people talk about and evaluate the art they were viewing. We were taught that everyone's input added to the learning experience and that art terminology should be taught through group discussion. I wondered if the techniques for encouraging critical thinking about art would work in my class.

### Inquiry

*What would happen if art works were introduced in the GED class? Would this be a format for practicing critical thought?*

### Action

I developed ten brief lessons (15 to 30 minutes) around four paintings: Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, Kandinsky's *Yellow, Red, and Blue*, Monet's *Beach at Trouville*, and an untitled work by Chagall. I wanted students to study a content area not tested on the GED, and at the same time, to practice critical thinking with the hope they would transfer those skills to the GED. I designed lessons that would allow the students to develop an art vocabulary to use in supporting their interpretations. I planned each lesson to build on the previous. Some lessons involved individual assignments but most were planned as group work. Three of the lessons were attempts to transfer the critical thinking methods we used in art class to analyzing poems and answering essay questions like those on the GED.

Using a simple critical thinking formula — WHAT? WHY? HOW? and WHO? — I asked the class to talk about what they saw in a painting. When someone mentioned an art term, we would list it. Before viewing a new art piece, we would review what we had learned from our discussion of the previous work. I waited longer for students to offer

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opinions and I asked them to elaborate on their answers. My goal was for the students themselves to be able, by the final class, to lead the discussion of a new painting.

After practicing critical thinking methods with the art pieces, I asked the class to analyze poems using the same methods. What is this poem about? Why did the poet write about this subject? How does the poet use language to convey his theme? Who is the poet? Again, I probed the students for more information and waited longer for their responses. When someone used a literary term we wrote it on the board, keeping the list for review.

I asked the students to use the same formula to begin thinking about the essay questions on the GED test. What is the subject of the essay? Why are you writing about this subject? How will you support your thesis? I asked the class to explain the terms introduction, thesis statement, body, and conclusion. We used several GED-type essay questions to go through this process before I asked the students to write.

## Data Collection

I kept a research journal of the ten lessons, recording both what happened in class and my observations. I audio-taped and transcribed three of the art lessons. I collected two sets of poetry assignments, one set of student journal entries, and one set of student essays. Finally, I interviewed four of my students about the art lessons and critical thinking.

## Findings

I was honestly surprised by the multiple levels of critical thinking that were going on in the class. Over the ten lessons, there was evidence that students analyzed, associated, reviewed, transferred, organized, listed, supported, explained, recognized, labeled, defined, compared, concluded, and created information. For example, when we played a color association game and I asked what color came to mind when they thought of a word such as "hope" or "war," the students listed their responses, drew conclusions from them, and then associated these conclusions with the colors in Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. In other lessons, students discussed the difficulty of certain types of questions. They named and used problem-solving techniques, and they used art and poetry terminology to support their answers.

When asked to explain her understanding of critical thinking, Angela, an 18-year-old student who had been taught at home her entire life said, "You have to explain why all the time." Rubin, a student originally from Panama, agreed with her adding, "It gets you to think more by having to break something down to explain it." One of my older adults, Marty, suggested, "It works for all pictures and poetry." Finally, Carol, my oldest and longest-attending student said, "It helps me to do the thinking when asked those questions. It makes me feel good about myself when I answer." These comments show that my students are able to think about thinking and are able to see the process behind the answer.

Students gained knowledge from each other rather than only from a book, a teacher, or a computer. Quoting from my daily journal, "It was amazing. All six students made at least one comment today about the painting. The students argued points with each other to come to consensus." The student journals reflected this as well. Angela wrote, "[The art class] shows other peoples' points of view. We talk about what other people might feel. It lets you say what you think and then a new world opens up to others." When asked in the final interview about the type of class that helps him learn, Rubin said, "Interactive. People participating is important." This increase in class participation indicated to me that the students were taking ownership of their learning, and I enjoyed the horizontal flow of knowledge. It was energizing rather than draining. For the final art class, we viewed a work by Chagall. The tape of this class discussion is lively and interactive with very few teacher comments. Students propose possible art styles, mention other art works and artists, and offer their own interpretations of Chagall's piece.

The research project gave me the freedom to break from the traditional GED content. Using art created an enriched, comfortable, and energized atmosphere. We were enriched by the new information we learned about the art, the artists, and each other. Students were comfortable arguing, asking each other questions, and volunteering new information. Attendance was consistent throughout the ten lessons, allowing for lessons to build on each other and creating a momentum that culminated in the best set of essays I have ever had from a GED class. We have to practice thinking before we can organize our thoughts. My students talked about their thinking before they began to write. Time spent in class becoming more aware

of the learning process was time well spent. Consider these two unsolicited comments made to me during the course. Tommy, another 18-year-old said, "I never thought about being able to know who painted something by the style." (Later in the course, students were able to recognize two poets by their styles.) Carol said, "Art was something I have never even thought about. It had nothing to do with me. If I saw a picture, I knew nothing about it and felt ignorant. Now, I'm telling people about my art class and looking at pictures for the first time." Students' awareness of themselves as learners was exciting both to them and to me.

## Implications and Future Directions

This research project changed the way students and I interact and the way they interact with each other. There will be greater opportunity for critical thinking to occur in any class I teach. Waiting longer for students to respond and paying more attention to their responses validated my students. They paid more attention to each other and contributed more to class. Also, I will not hesitate to teach about "thinking." Finally, I will be bringing art to class and looking for other subjects that help us connect with each other. A final quotation from Carol will continue to motivate me. She said, "It's always good to bring in something that doesn't have to do with what you are gathered for, because people like that." ❑

[1] Dantonio, Marylou (1990). How can we create thinkers? Questioning strategies that work for teachers. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

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